
The Middle Length Lamrim

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by Sandup Tsering

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Motivation

Please establish bodhicitta, the aspiration to achieve complete enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, as the motivation for listening to the teaching. This is very important for any spiritual practice we engage in.

The further from this life, the closer to the future life

Each passing day our life is being exhausted, but not the continuum of our mind and our self, or the 'I' which doesn't finish or pass away with the end of this life. At the end of our life, the continuum of our mind and self will become separated from or sever its relationship with our body and current life. This means that there is a life after, just as there was a life before. There is a life after because the continuum of our mind and self doesn't finish with this life.

Relationship of I, mind, and body

As far as living this life is concerned, we can rely on material conditions, such as food, drink and shelter, for comfort and sustenance. However, when we leave this life the continuum of our self or the 'I' goes on. We must think therefore about the factors that will take care of us. It must be our mind because it goes with us as our companion. If we are accompanied by a good state of mind, then we will be fine; if the accompanying mind is calm and happy, then we too will be calm and happy.

We can understand from our current life experience that if our mind is good, happy and relaxed, we are also happy. Likewise, the sort of future that lies ahead of us depends on the type of mind which goes with us. Therefore, it is worth training our mind so that the mind becomes positive, such as being compassionate and kind, and not harmful and ill-minded towards other beings. With a happy and positive mind, we will find happiness now and through it, in the future, we will find a good rebirth.

By the continuum of the I, we are referring to the I that always exists. On the basis of that I, we innately experience a sense of I. This I is not dependent on or particularly linked with our current life's body or experiences. It comes from past lives and goes to the future and its continuity cannot be severed. We need to think about what this I wants; what do I want? I want happiness but not suffering. There are various favourable conditions which fulfil the wishes of this I, what this I wants, as well as hindrances to fulfilling the wishes of the I.

Mental and material happiness

We can talk about happiness on the mental and physical level as mental and physical happiness. Of the two, mental happiness is more important. Our experiences indicate that whenever our mind is unhappy, disturbed or under

the power of mental afflictions such as anger, pride or jealousy, we are unhappy, even if we are doing well physically or materially. Mental afflictions are the cause of harming other beings, as well as ourselves. For example, feeling bitter or angry towards friends gives us pain and misery.

A calm mind, altruism and friendship

Having a calm and happy mind is the most important factor for achieving any goal which relates to our present life or future lives. So, we must take care of our mental health and ensure that we are mentally stable and happy. This is very important. For example, as a social animal, one factor that is very important for our wellbeing is having a good and friendly relationship with others as this supports the stability of our peace and happiness. Therefore, it is important to practise patience and kindness so that we maintain harmony in our relationship with others.

We must know all other beings are the same as us in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Such awareness and sensitivity of the oneness of all beings gives us a good ground to practise loving kindness and show respect to others. If we are not able to benefit others, at least we will not harm them because we know they are no different from us in wanting happiness and not suffering.

In essence, we need to cultivate altruism, a caring and empathetic mental attitude which fosters friendship and harmonious relationships with others. Altruism and empathy draw others to us as friends. In spiritual terms, true friends are those who support us in accumulating virtue, whilst evil friends are those who have a non-virtuous influence on us. Therefore, it is important we recognise inner and outer fiends and make sure we only befriend virtuous friends who help us habituate or emulate virtue and not non-virtue. Our best tool is our own discriminating wisdom and intelligence, knowing what brings us harm or benefit.

As a spiritual practitioner, we must direct our attention inside rather than to the outside world, examining and determining what brings us happiness and suffering, and their causes. We will then come to realise that the primary causes and conditions for the ups and downs in our lives are within us, they are not outer circumstances. This is very true because internally if our mind is agitated, restless and unhappy, then we can't be happy and at peace, even if externally we are surrounded by good conditions. Not only that, if our mind is distorted and disturbed, then we cannot undertake any activities properly, even our daily chores, let alone meditation and Dharma practice. For example, if we sit in a meditation posture in a quiet room while our mind is overpowered by an afflictive emotion such as anger or strong desire, then we will find that only our body is in the room, but not our mind. Hence, we won't be able to direct and focus our mind on the object of meditation.

Overcoming afflictive emotions

It is very obvious that when we fall prey to afflictive emotions, such as anger and attachment, and don't know

how to deal with them, we find ourselves in difficult, miserable and unhappy situations. But, when our mind is not affected by any afflictive emotions, not only do we find ourselves at ease and joyful, but we can also think more clearly and focus better.

As an afflictive emotion, anger is obviously a destructive force and a harmful one. For example, when we experience anger, we can easily recognise its shortcomings, in terms of losing and disturbing our inner peace, happiness, clarity and stability. Hence, we will consider counteracting it. But the shortcomings of attachment are harder to recognise. Instead, attachment seems like the pleasure we seek and is harder than anger to overcome. When we talk about a very strong attachment, we know that it can bring us much distraction and suffering. So, we know that we must counter it to get back to our normal self and have a mind which is peaceful and relaxed.

We choose a meditation practice depending on the type of afflictive emotion we wish to overcome. We must first counter any afflictive emotion which for us is the most predominant and disturbing. If anger is very predominant and affecting us the most then we must first apply the meditation practice which can remedy it, such as the meditation on loving kindness and compassion or patience. Whereas to counteract attachment, we meditate and reflect on the ugly or unpleasant side of the desired object.

We must be persistent and patient with the meditation practice and not expect results to happen quickly. We will see results and progress gradually as we meditate over time. For example, we will gradually become calm and there will be a reduction in the force of anger or attachment. Once we have overcome the afflictive emotion that is immediately affecting us and which prevents us from doing the things we want to do, we should go ahead with whatever we want to do, such as the meditation practice. We will find it much easier to direct and keep our mind on the object of meditation. Meditation practice is about keeping and habituating the mind on the virtuous object and thereby eliminating or lessening mental afflictions. That is how meditation brings a calm and subdued state of mind.

Adopt virtue and abandon non-virtue

The fact of the matter is that if our mind is calm, relaxed and joyful, we will also be very calm, joyful and happy, which is what we all want. Although each person might have different things that they wish to achieve, in essence, we are all the same in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Each individual must take personal responsibility for understanding and creating the cause of the happiness we seek, and to abandon the cause of the suffering we do not want. So, it is important to equip ourselves with discriminating wisdom to understand the causes and conditions of happiness and suffering so that we will know what to do to achieve happiness and abandon suffering. In other words, our Dharma practice is to create the causes of happiness, because we wish for it,

and to abandon the causes of suffering, because we do not want it.

Furthermore, what we need to create is virtue, which is the cause of happiness, and to abandon non-virtue, which is the cause of suffering. To see more happiness and less suffering we must live life by following the proper order of what to accept and what to reject. If we face any difficulties and challenges, we should not give up and get discouraged. We should think of Shantideva's advice: *There is no such thing that does not become easier through habituation.* We should think that what is difficult and what is not difficult to a large extent depends on our frame of mind or how we mentally perceive the situation. So, by reminding ourselves of this and other instructions, we should maintain interest, hope and spirit in living a virtuous life.

We also need to understand that what we usually seek and call happiness is a samsaric pleasure or happiness called *contaminated happiness* which is technically a type of suffering called *suffering of change*. It is not lasting and has a nature of eventually turning into suffering or dissatisfaction. For example, a new car might initially give us a lot of excitement and joy, but soon that excitement and joy wears out and we have a lot of problems because of the car.

Get rid of distracting thoughts

Generating uncontrolled thoughts is one of the main factors for bringing anxiety and unnecessary mental turbulence such as stress, fear, confusion and so forth. Hence, the purpose of meditation is to pause and remedy these wondering thoughts to enhance peace and rest within. Most importantly, we will find that our mental attitude and mental perspective towards things and people have a lot to do with what we go through in our life. With the right mental attitude, we can foster a good relationship with others built on trust and faith, greatly benefitting ourselves and others.

So, to cultivate a positive state of mind we must calm down our wild mind which habitually wanders off after things. Filling our mind with distracting thoughts we lose mental focus and clarity. To overcome distracting thoughts, a simple breathing meditation technique can be very effective. All we do is sit in a relaxed posture and direct our full mental attention to the incoming and outgoing breath. As the mind sits on the breath, all distracting thoughts cease, and stillness and peace arise within us. We will note that our mind finds a moment of rest and a break from busy thoughts.

Validate the Dharma by practice

It is not enough just to learn about the benefits of meditation; we must experience the benefits by applying the meditation in practice. Once we establish or validate the benefit of meditation through our practice, we will be further motivated to engage in the practice. I can tell you from my own experience that if you maintain the right mental attitude, even if you are afflicted with physical illness and pain, inwardly you can sustain peace, joy and courage. I have told you in the past about an elderly woman who had passed away. She followed the Dharma

right to the end of her life. Her family are not Buddhist, but her son wrote to me to acknowledge the benefits of the Dharma for his mother, particularly at the time of death. Her practice gave her tremendous peace, comfort and joy. In a way, their mother exemplified the benefit of the Dharma to her son and family. I found her story inspirational. So, not only does a person who practises the Dharma find it a source of joy and happiness, but their practice can introduce and inspire Dharma to others and bring them joy as well.

However, if we follow the Dharma but don't practise, then we may cause others to have a wrong view about the Dharma. So, practising the Dharma is beneficial for ourselves and others. With a consistency in our Dharma practice, we can develop a habituation with the practice, and it will become easier. For example, when we are feeling low or in despair, we will be able to easily apply the practice and cultivate positive thinking. Hence, the Dharma practice comes to our aid in times of need.

We will stop the teaching here and you can bring in the tea.

Geshe la is saying that if we have a lot of things to talk about, having a tea break will help our conversation!

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Edited Version*

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